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The Use of Online Testing in Language Courses

It is generally acknowledged that examinations are a very common assessment and evaluation tool in universities and there are many types of examination questions. Today universities across the world are increasingly integrating technology into the classroom. As a result, some exams can be conducted in a secure online environment in a proctored computer lab or assigned as paper based or online “take home” exams. Thus, it is interesting to analyze the peculiarities of online testing to highlight the advantages of this tool. Moreover, this article contains a brief description of different types of examination questions used for online testing in language courses.

To begin with, let us consider the peculiarities of the examination questions which are used for online tests in language courses.

Multiple choice questions are composed of one question (stem) with multiple possible answers (choices), including the correct answer and several incorrect answers (distractors). Typically, students select the correct answer by circling the associated number or letter, or filling in the associated circle on the machine-readable response sheet. Students can generally respond to these questions quite quickly. As a result, they are often used to test student’s knowledge of a broad range of content. Creating these questions can be time-consuming because it is often difficult to generate several plausible distractors. However, they can be marked very quickly.

True/false questions are only composed of a statement. Students respond to the questions by indicating whether the statement is true or false. Like multiple choice questions, true/false questions are most often used to assess familiarity with course content and to check for popular misconceptions; allow students to respond quickly so exams can use a large number of them to test knowledge of a broad range of content; are easy and quick to grade but time-consuming to create. True/false questions provide students with a 50% chance of guessing the right answer. For this reason, multiple choice questions are often used instead of true/false questions. It is

possible to increase the usefulness of true/false questions by asking students to correct false statements [1].

Students respond to *matching* questions by pairing each of a set of stems (e.g., definitions) with one of the choices provided on the exam. These questions are often used to assess recognition and recall and so are most often used in courses where acquisition of detailed knowledge is an important goal. They are generally quick and easy to create and mark, but students require more time to respond to these questions than a similar number of multiple choice or true/false items.

Short answer questions are typically composed of a brief prompt that demands a written answer that varies in length from one or two words to a few sentences. They are most often used to test basic knowledge of key facts and terms. Alternatively, this could be written as a fill-in-the-blank short answer question. Short answer questions can also be used to test higher thinking skills, including analysis or evaluation. Short answer questions have many advantages. Many instructors report that they are relatively easy to construct and can be constructed faster than multiple choice questions. Unlike matching, true/false, and multiple choice questions, short answer questions make it difficult for students to guess the answer. Short answer questions provide students with more flexibility to explain their understanding and demonstrate creativity than they would have with multiple choice questions. When using short answer questions to test student knowledge of definitions it is necessary to have a mix of questions, some that supply the term and require the students to provide the definition, and other questions that supply the definition and require that students provide the term. The latter sort of questions can be structured as fill-in-the-blank questions. This mix of formats will better test student knowledge because it does not rely solely on recognition or recall of the term [1].

Essay questions provide a complex prompt that requires written responses, which can vary in length from a couple of paragraphs to many pages. Like short answer questions, they provide students with an opportunity to explain their understanding and demonstrate creativity, but make it hard for students to arrive at an

acceptable answer by bluffing. They can be constructed reasonably quickly and easily but marking these questions can be time-consuming and grader agreement can be difficult.

Essay questions differ from short answer questions in that the essay questions are less structured. This openness allows students to demonstrate that they can integrate the course material in creative ways. As a result, essays are a favoured approach to test higher levels of cognition including analysis, synthesis and evaluation. However, the requirement that the students provide most of the structure increases the amount of work required to respond effectively. Students often take longer to compose a five paragraph essay than they would take to compose five one paragraph answers to short answer questions. This increased workload limits the number of essay questions that can be posed on a single exam and thus can restrict the overall scope of an exam to a few topics or areas. To ensure that this does not cause students to panic or blank out, it is necessary to give the option of answering one of two or more questions and distribute possible essay questions before the exam and make your marking criteria slightly stricter. This gives all students an equal chance to prepare and should improve the quality of the answers – and the quality of learning – without making the exam any easier.

Oral examinations allow students to respond directly to the instructor's questions and/or to present prepared statements. These exams are especially popular in language courses that demand 'speaking' but they can be used to assess understanding in almost any course by following the guidelines for the composition of short answer questions. Some of the principle advantages to oral exams are that they provide nearly immediate feedback and so allow the student to learn as they are tested. There are two main drawbacks to oral exams: the amount of time required and the problem of record-keeping. Oral exams typically take at least ten to fifteen minutes per student, even for a midterm exam. As a result, they are rarely used for large classes. Furthermore, unlike written exams, oral exams do not automatically generate a written record. To ensure that students have access to written feedback, it

is recommended that instructors take notes during oral exams using a rubric and/or checklist and provide a photocopy of the notes to the students [1].

In many departments, oral exams are rare. Students may have difficulty adapting to this new style of assessment. In this situation, it is possible to make the oral exam optional. While it can take more time to prepare two tests, having both options allows students to choose the one which suits them and their learning style best.

As nowadays students may protest showing up to class to take a quiz or a test, it is possible to deliver assessments online at the students' convenience. Let us consider the tools which are necessary for the teachers to best serve the needs of a diverse group of students as the use of these tools reshape teaching practices.

There are some definite advantages to online testing.

- Although creating online tests is labor-intensive, once a test is developed, it is relatively easy to transfer it and repeat it in other courses.
- Online tests are asynchronous and can be accessed on a variety of devices. If students buy the Blackboard mobile app, they can even take a test from their Smartphone. The flexibility offered by online testing can be a great solution for learners with busy schedules or when unexpected class cancellations occur.
- While it is hard to prevent cheating, Blackboard tests do offer many settings for instructors to randomize questions, impose time limits, and restrict attempts.
- Testing in an online environment can be a lot more interactive than traditional paper and pen tests. Instructors can embed multimedia in test questions to provide more engaging assessments.
- For objective question types like multiple-choice, Blackboard will automatically grade student responses, saving time for the instructor and providing more immediate feedback to students.

- Online tests can be more accessible to students with disabilities who have assistive technologies built into their computers than hand written tests are [2].

Here are some practical tips for applying online tests in language courses.

- It is necessary to introduce online tests (and any other new learning technologies in general) to students early in the semester to reduce technical issues and build desired study habits.

- Using online tests as ungraded practice tests will provide a useful self-check tool for students and greatly reduce concerns about cheating.

- Another way to avoid the cheating issue is to design online tests to be open book assessments with a time limit.

- Online tests can address student demands for exam study guides. It is possible to provide students with an online practice test a few days before a traditional exam.

- If students are struggling with a particular concept and a need for formative assessment occurs, online quizzes can be applied as a just in time assessment to help identify areas where extra practice is needed.

- Using online pre- and post- tests is a way to measure student learning over the course of a curricular unit. This approach is especially useful for competency-based learning models that focus on mastery of skills over time spent on learning [2].

To sum up, it is recommended that instructors take into consideration all peculiarities of creating and using online tests to ensure positive results. Students are already using online tools as study aids for their courses. Instructors can better serve students by providing them with custom-made study aids like online practice tests, rather than entrusting students to rely on outside resources that may not be valid sources of information.

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